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ABSTRACT

The goals and approaches of Chinese curricula in large institutions vary from the preparation of students to do research in ancient government documents to the insistence on a mastery of spoken Mandarin adequate for functioning in a modern Chinese society. No institution does it all, but the limited program in a small college, free from the expectation of any finished product, can be an appropriate introduction to the language and writing system. Specific interests of individual students may be pursued through supplementary reading on such topics as dialectology, lexicography, the influence of Sanskrit scholars on early Chinese phonological studies, or the intricacies of prosody in Tang poetry. Vocabulary items encountered in related courses in Chinese history, art, or philosophy, as well as the most frequently occurring terms in current affairs, can be incorporated into language exercises. The article suggests that by adapting vocabulary and individual study to the requirements of sutdents, to related curricular offerings, and to events in the world, limited Chinese programs provide both sound language instruction and the needed foundation for further study in a variety of areas. (Author)

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CUSTOM TAILORING: STRENGTH OF THE CHINESE PROGRAM IN A SMALL COLLEGE

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We who teach Chinese on a limited scale in small institutions are very much aware of the shortcomings of our language programs: few students, lack of recognition by curriculum planners, insufficient time for thorough development of desired skills. But I am convinced that these same limitations can be an advantage in freeing us from the demands of rigid goals and precise articulation of levels.

Let us first face that venerable spectre, the enormity of our task, a notion that dominates the literature of the profession. It has been said that in this world of diverse opinions there is at least one view agreed upon by all, the extreme difficulty of mastering the Chinese language (H. Yang, 1949). Scholars cite the absence of cognates, cumbersomeness of the writing system, and complexities resulting from China's long continuity in time together with the depth of her cultural experience. (See Mote, 1964.) Not only is Chinese seen as extraordinarily difficult for western students, there is also the feeling that the time constraints of the academic career prevent one from acquiring sufficient mastery of the language. Woolley (1957) suggests that achieving true professional competence in the field presents almost insuperable difficulties unless one is married to a Chinese intellectual or was brought up in China. And David Lattimore's exceptionally

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polished counsel of despair (1969) sums it up: "Full-time graduate schooling doesn't go beyond four or five years. Learning Chinese takes ten." Given the enormity of the undertaking, even for institutions with extensive Chinese programs, is it not the better part of academic valor for those of us with one or two-year offerings to accept limited quantitative goals and seek, instead, breadth of view and depth of understanding?

Although agreeing that to learn Chinese is a formidable undertaking, individuals in our profession--teachers of Chinese, textbook writers, or language program administrators--disagree concerning basic goals of the enterprise. Some espouse the view of Robert Hartwell (1964) that language competence is primarily a research tool for economists, political scientists and sociologists. Others would include among its users scholars in the humanities. Still others see as valid objectives the ability to use the language appropriately in its own cultural setting (Cheng, 1971) or the liberation of students from Western ethnocentrism (DeFrancis, 1971). The result of this ambivalence concerning goals and, consequently, curriculum is that each institution has its peculiar approach to teaching Chinese. No one does it all. We tend to produce either meticulous researchers incapable of interpersonal communication in the language, or fluent Mandarin conversationalists with limited control of textual material, or even Sinological literary critics who must discuss their insights in English. And to this list should be added the newer category of those, trained in linguistics, who can explain the phonological correspondences between Archaic and Ancient Chinese, Min and Wu, but still cannot ask the location of either the toilet or the library.

My reluctant conclusion is that no academic program, necessarily restricted in time, can provide complete training in the Chinese language.

Unfortunately, the limited offerings of most of our small, liberal arts schools are inadequate to achieve even one of the specialized goals mentioned. But the very fact that we cannot accomplish those goals frees us from attempting them. Rather we may tailor our programs to the curricula of our institutions and to the interests and needs of our students.

Tailoring Chinese language teaching to the curriculum of a specific school need not entail abandoning basic elementary instruction. It does suggest that, along with the phonological system, the sentence patterns, and the introduction to the writing system, instructors will present vocabulary appropriate to other courses actually available to students. At Wake Forest, courses in oriental art, religions of Asia, and Chinese history influence the selection of supplementary vocabulary for Chinese class. Last year the art department compiled a glossary of Chinese art terms to be pronounced on tape, requiring students to spend time in the language laboratory practicing the pronunciation of forms they are to encounter most frequently in their study of Chinese art.

Time is also spent in helping students reconcile the many Romanization systems encountered in history and religion textbooks and dictionaries with the Pin Yin transcription of their Chinese language textbooks, so that they will be able to recognize and pronounce Chinese words appearing in scholarly writing of the West. It is our wistful ambition to eliminate such barbarisms as yængsti kaiyæng for 'Yangzi Jiang' and jihol for 'Rehe'.

With regard to the individual student, custom tailoring a Chinese program means flexibility of emphasis in such matters as conversation versus reading and traditional literature versus the sayings of Mao Zi-dong. It involves devising assignments and classroom activities that permit the student to pursue his particular interests while providing him with the

elementary skills required for that pursuit. It anticipates and applies the claim of Lü Pi-sung (1974) that "students can only master a language through practice" and that the teacher's role must be that of "organizing and guiding students in practice and stimulating their interest."

Tailoring Chinese instruction to fit the student requires suggesting outside reading about Chinese, such as the delightful essays of George A. Kennedy on linguistic topics or the controversial writings of Ernest Fenollosa about Chinese characters. Students sometimes find it profitable to follow up the introduction of Mandarin tones with reading about the contributions of the Sanskrit scholars to early Chinese research in phonology or about prosody in Chinese poetry. Even though the poetry has to be read in translation, prosodic features are available to the students through listening to records of poems read in Chinese in true "Lao Xiansheng" style. It is also rewarding for students to memorize a short poem, imitating the tones and intonation contours, while relying on translations for details of meaning. After all, the oral transmission of literature is highly respectable in Chinese culture.

The approach recommended here permits classroom presentation of changes in usage, such as the withering away of the honorific system in the PRC, lexical innovations, as well as altered connotations for familiar words and phrases. Practice in incorporating alternative terminology into everyday sentences is appropriate. That is, students need to practice the use of tongzhi or xiansheng, taitai or airen as demanded by the circumstances. It is even suggested that some time be spent in talking about the language, a practice long frowned on in the lingering Calvinistic suspicion that anything enjoyable must be bad for us--in language class as elsewhere.

Most classes have at least one member who is fascinated by the Chinese writing system and who will delight in investigating its history from the oracle bones to the most recently promulgated simplified characters. Others may prefer to focus on lexicography in China's long scholarly history. To the uninitiated a problem like describing the pronunciation of a word by means of the Chinese script is mind boggling. Skeptical of fan qie and encouraged by zhu yin fu hao, they are relieved at the advent of pin yin. A related field, etymology, appeals to some students. And there is the continuing pull of dialect study, evolution of the sound systems, grammar--declared non-existent by certain Sinologists in pre-Chao days, but revived in the last two decades. Similarly, there is a great deal to be discovered concerning the relationship between Chinese and neighboring languages. Students are impressed by the parallels between Japanese and Korean borrowings from Chinese and our English indebtedness to the Greeks, Romans, and more directly, the French.

It is also possible to tailor the daily language drills to students' interests outside the academic world. The recent U. S. tour of Chinese gymnasts, the archaeological exhibit from Mainland China, Mr. Kissinger's latest travels, even the feminist movement in Chinese-speaking areas of the world can be interjected into exercises on co-verbs, topic and comment sentences, le, and de.

Far from suggesting that any of these lines of inquiry be substituted for traditional language study, I am recommending that they be employed to give focus to the individual student's work. The instructor most provide guidance and discipline to ensure that such tailoring contribute to the total endeavor. I might add that contemporary theories regarding human cognition and language acquisition support the value of this approach.

What is more, it is peculiarly appropriate for the liberal arts curriculum, adding a great deal of content to what have been considered skills courses and emphasizing the humanistic considerations behind the teaching of Chinese for non-specialists described by DeFrancis (1971). "The study of a foreign language by Americans, even if it stops short of functional mastery, can still be of great symbolic importance, for it can represent a touch of humility, a touch of humanity, a reaching out toward other cultures in the hope of achieving some measure of understanding."

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